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Because Context Matters

Barabbas and Me

A Contextual Reflection from Preserving Bible Times

Introduction His name is Barabbas. He appears as a seemingly incidental and accidental participant in the Passion narratives. Yet there are no accidental participants in the sweeping story of Scripture. Everyone and everything is there for a reason. A closer look at Barabbas reveals that he appears in all four Gospels unlike most other people and events. In fact, more verses deal with Barabbas than with Judas' betrayal. What to make of this?

What's in a Name? Names are always significant in Scripture and are often an integral part of the story. Jesus' Semitic name *Yeshua* means *the Lord rescues*. Couldn't be more appropriate for His ministry and task here on earth. In Luke 1, Zechariah's name means *whom God remembers*,¹ an ironic name, given that for most of his life it seems (from Zechariah's perspective) as if God has forgotten Elizabeth and his profound longings for a priestly son.²

Remember Simon Bar-jona?³ The very nature of his name tells us something about his lineage. *Bar* in Aramaic means *son of*. And so Simon is known genealogically as Simon son of Jonah. Fascinatingly, Barabbas' name starts with *Bar*. The second half of his name is even more intriguing. It is *abbas*. We've seen this root word *abba* before as Jesus uses it in the beginning of what we now know as The Lord's Prayer (better understood as The Disciples' Prayer).⁴ Jesus begins that prayer by collectively asking His disciples to come to *our Father*, thus challenging them to radically change (and expand) their observant Jewish view of God. Jesus does so by using an Aramaic child's word,⁵ *abba*, for "Father/Daddy."

"He is We!" Putting these linguistic pieces together, Barabbas's name literally means *son of father* - a very generic name for a very generic person. We do no injustice to this passage by observing that his name symbolizes he is the son of many (or even all) fathers. With his name, Barabbas is representing all of us in the Passion narratives. He is we! We are he. Here we have the first clue as to why he has been intentionally placed in these Gospel narratives. Like Adam, he too is our perfect representative. So let's take a closer look at whom Barrabbas is and the important role he plays in the Passion of Jesus.

One Vile Person The Gospel writers allow us to construct a composite picture of Barabbas and what he represents. John tells us he was a *robber*.⁶ Matthew labels Barabbas as *a notorious one* (Wuest).⁷ Mark and Luke refer to him as one who committed murder as part of an insurrection in Jerusalem.⁸ Collectively, Barabbas is a thief, a murderer, one who participates in mutiny and rebellion, and a well-known really bad guy. That's why he is incarcerated on death row in Pilate's prison awaiting a shameful death by crucifixion. With this as the contextual backdrop, we can begin to understand why Barabbas truly represents us in his imprisoned predicament! As Donald Grey Barnhouse once observed:

We are all of Adam's race. We have been bound over for our sedition against God.
We are robbers of God's glory. We are murderers of our own souls and the souls of others.
We find ourselves bound in the dark-some prison of sin. We feel in our hearts that we merit
the sentence that has been announced to us and we wait in trembling for the time of judgment.⁹

It's all in Your Plumb Line How do you see yourself in your best moments? How about in your worst moments? Most of us, if we look at life as if “grading on the curve” applies, usually conclude that we are better than most people we know. That’s relativism. But if the plumb line were the Holiness of God (which it is), what kind of absolute righteousness score would we receive? Someone once observed (wish I could remember who that was) that when God’s Holiness is the yardstick, the difference between you and me and Adolph Hitler gets lost in the rounding. Now there is an arresting thought and a sobering perspective! And that, I would suggest, is another reason why we find Barabbas in the Passion narratives. He is we. When God’s Holiness is the plumb line, we are all robbers, murders, insurrectionists (against God) and notorious “sinners.” As such, we all have no hope and justifiably sit in the prison of our own sin awaiting final judgment.

Pilate’s Predicament A chess match is being played out during Passion Week as Pilate and the Temple Aristocracy try to politically outmaneuver each other. The Jewish leadership (Sanhedrin) wants Jesus put to death. If Jesus continues doing what He has been doing, e.g., bringing Lazarus back to life and cleansing of the Temple, control of the Temple and all that cash being generated by this Temple, Inc. cash cow might be at risk.¹⁰ This corrupt Temple leadership has already made a significant move by holding a “kangaroo court” trial of Jesus and “convicted” Him of blasphemy. Yet in the polytheistic culture of Rome, blasphemy is not a crime. However, sedition is. So Temple leadership approaches Pilate, the Roman Procurator, and charges Jesus with sedition, something they know Pilate must deal with by Roman law. Ironically, that is exactly the charge of which Barabbas was justly convicted.

Pilate is not blind to the manipulated charges being brought by these Jewish leaders and he sees their desired endgame. He knows that 80-90% of the people in the land are poor peasants¹¹ and have identified with Jesus having much affection for Him. So crucifying Jesus is not a good political move for Pilate to make in order to keep the lid on Judea. Furthermore, if control is the objective, it certainly helps to have the religious leadership on his side. As part of this backdrop, history tells us that Pilate is currently on shaky ground with Rome due to some very poor decisions and actions he took against the Jews in the past.¹² So the last thing Pilate needs is for Temple leadership to oppose him (and appeal to Rome) with regard to the disposition of Jesus.

Pilate initially tries to avoid being responsible for whatever might happen to Jesus by sending Him to Herod Antipas who is in Jerusalem for Passover.¹³ Since Antipas governs the Galilee district, Pilate tries to force him to take responsibility for this situation because Jesus is from his jurisdiction. Herod Antipas is wise enough to realize he doesn’t want to get involved in the politics of this “case” and returns Jesus to Pilate unjudged. In so doing, Pilate’s dilemma remains unsolved. But there still might be a way to maneuver out of his predicament.

Contrast the Best with the Worst! Pilate remembers the Passover tradition where the Imperial Governor (Procurator) of Judea traditionally releases a prisoner as a symbolic act during this highly significant festival.¹⁴ This act reminds the Israelites of their release from Egypt so many centuries before. So Pilate conjures up a plan. If he invokes this Passover prisoner-release tradition and offers the people a choice between the most notorious and noxious criminal of the day (one kind of a *son of father*) and a prisoner who has not only been wrongly accused, but is actually without blame (One who states He is the Son of the Father), the people will no doubt choose to set the innocent Jesus free. Then Pilate would be off the political hook. And that’s when Barabbas comes to Pilate’s mind. Who would ever want Barabbas, released? No one in their right mind!

In hatching this plan, Pilate makes two tactical errors. Rather than making the “obvious” decision himself and freeing Jesus (a courage issue), he decides to let the crowd make the choice (a discernment issue). In doing so, he doesn’t assess what kind of a “crowd” he has before him in the courtyard. These two mistakes will doom his plan and put his name infamously into the history books.

Crowd of Cronies Pilate failed to realize that the “crowd” before him was not representative of the masses who truly loved Jesus. This is a handpicked group of the family members, friends and officials of the Temple who have been carefully coached by Temple leadership to refuse Jesus as a Passover release option. Understanding the nature of this courtyard crowd frees us from a common misunderstanding. None of the people in this select group were participants of the crowd who several days earlier shouted *hosanna* on “Palm Sunday.” Remember, this scene takes place in a private (and secure) place in the early morning hours away from public view. The hundreds of

thousands of Passover pilgrims who comprised that Palm Sunday throng and love Jesus don't even know how the Temple Leadership/Pilate chess game is unfolding. This context keeps us from erroneously concluding that the crowds following Jesus were fickle – crying *hosanna* one day and then yelling *crucify Him* a few days later. Not so. These were two very different kinds of people.

Best Laid Plan As Pilate offers his Passover release options to those in this courtyard scene, the carefully orchestrated response from the few hundred hand-selected cronies stuns him. How could they possibly prefer Barabbas? What went wrong? This makes no sense. And so his “ingenious” plan betrays him. Even washing his hands will not remove his culpability. He made a key tactical error by trusting a “crowd” he doesn’t understand to make the right decision.

Meanwhile on Death Row During all the commotion in Pilate’s courtyard, Barabbas sits alone in his death-row cell whiling away his final hours before his crucifixion. He knows his death is imminent and well deserved. His conviction was justified and he is resigned to the outcome. He has no excuses and no options. All that is left is to count down the final hours before suffering the excruciating pain and agony that will be the prologue to his shameful death on a cross.

As Barabbas sits in his cell, he suddenly hears his name – *Barabbas* – being shouted. Then he hears his name again. A short time later he hears, *crucify him, crucify him*. Perhaps he ponders, “Are people that exercised about my crime and crucifixion? Are they so determined that I die before the Passover Sabbath that they are willing to gather and shout for Pilate to hasten my crucifixion?” As he processes this crowd noise, he hears the footsteps of someone coming to his cell. Slowly the door opens and the jailer commands him to rise. His time has come. As the shackles constraining his limbs are released, Barabbas knows he is about to die. Then, he hears astonishing words from this jailer that he never in his wildest dreams could ever imagine hearing, “Barabbas, you are free...go!”

How Can This Possibly Be? After dealing with the incredulity of these words and their incongruous nature, Barabbas struggles to give voice to a few choked words and asks his jailer “How can this be?” Then he hears that someone named Jesus has been chosen to take his place. He too has heard of Jesus; who hasn’t heard of this rabbi-like-no-other? Some even consider him to be the Messiah. “You mean to tell me that this amazing rabbi is going to die in my place!?” Bewildered, yet now compellingly curious, Barabbas decides to find out more about this rabbi *Yeshua*, the one known as *the Lord rescues*. Barabbas has just been given the privilege of being one of the first people to realize the significance of what it means to be rescued (pardoned) from death row by Jesus. Did he grasp the enormity of it all? The Gospel writers give us no clues.

Follow Him A few hours later, Barabbas hears that this Jesus is going to be crucified. He follows along with the crowd, sees Jesus stumble and Simon of Cyrene intervene. He carefully watches the nails being driven into Jesus’ hands and heels and realizes his limbs should be there in Jesus’ place. After a few hours of gazing on this remarkable man on the Cross that is draining the life from His body, he watches Jesus’ side being pierced. As Barabbas ponders Jesus’ last words, he overhears a Roman Centurion remark: *Truly this was the son of God.*¹⁵ “Maybe this *Yeshua* was more than just a remarkable man. Could he truly be the Son of God?” From that moment on, how did the weight of Jesus’ substitutionary death affect Barabbas? Did it change the way he lived the rest of his life? The Gospel writers again offer us no clues. If you were in Barabbas’ place, how would all of this have affected you?

Can you Imagine Barabbas had a choice. When the prison door of his cell swung open, when this amazing “Good News” was announced to him, he had to decide whether to walk out as a free man, or reject this pardon and remain in his cell and die. Seems like a no-brainer doesn’t it? Yet how many countless people, when told that Jesus has come to set them free, decide to stay in their own prison cells of guilt and shame, and ultimately die? Isn’t it amazing how people can reject this incredible free gift of amazing grace when it is unexpectedly offered to them!? In rejecting God’s pardon, their well-deserved death sentence remains in place.

Barabbas and Me/We Now we see why there was nothing incidental or accidental about Barabbas’ role in God’s sovereign Passion plan. He had to be there. It was intentional. And because he perfectly represents our

guilty and shameful condition before God, he had to be in that cell as our stand-in. Thus for all intent and purposes, we were in that cell too!

Reflections As you ponder this scene in the days ahead, consider reflecting upon the following:

- Can you identify with Barabbas? What must it have been like to sit in that dark and dank cell awaiting a very justified crucifixion? What death-row thoughts might have gone through your mind as you heard your name being shouted by the crowd, hears the jailer's footsteps, and watched the door of your cell swing open?
- Have you personalized Jesus' sacrificial and substitutionary death on the Cross for you? In both your mind and heart (thoughts and feelings), do you realize He intentionally took your place?
- Do you have a sober sense of who you were before Christ intervened in your life? That when God's Holiness is the plumb line, you and I are truly despicable criminals? Or are you somehow laboring under the misconception that God is truly fortunate to have you in His Kingdom? How you respond to these two very different perspectives shapes the nature and depth of your gratitude, praise and thanksgiving.
- Are you or have you been implicitly discounting, both to yourself and to others, just how amazing God's Grace and Mercy has been in your life?
- Are you letting the courtyard groups of people make important decisions for you that you need to courageously make for yourself?

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Notes and Sources

I am indebted to James Montgomery Boice for insights into Barabbas as found in his *The Gospel of John: An Expositional Commentary*.¹⁶

¹ *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974), p. 245.

² For a fuller contextual treatment of the life of Zechariah and Elizabeth, see Doug Greenwold, *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God* (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, Maryland, 2004).

³ Matthew 16:17

⁴ For a fuller contextual treatment of the "Disciples' Prayer," see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*, Chapter 11 "Our Daily Bread" (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, Maryland, 2008), pp. 95-100.

⁵ Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois: 1992), p. 618-619.

⁶ John 18:40

⁷ Matthew 27:16

⁸ Mark 15:7 and Luke 23:19

⁹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *God's Remedy*, "Expositions of the Epistle to the Romans," Vol. 3 (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1954), p. 376.

¹⁰ For the fuller contextual treatment of the corruption of the Temple, see Doug Greenwold's "Reforming Worship in the Temple" Reflection, number 209, February 2009, Preserving Bible Times.

¹¹ K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, Minneapolis, 1998), p. 104.

¹² Philo: On the Embassy of Gaius, 304-305.

¹³ Luke 23:6

¹⁴ John 18:39

¹⁵ Matthew 27:54

¹⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John: An Expositional Commentary* (Baker, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1999), p. 1457-1464.